Portolan Chart of the Pacific Coast from Guatemala to Northern Peru, with the Galapagos Islands (ca.1565)

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1 Portolan Charts in the 16th Century: Their Enchantment

Portolan charts, emerging in the Mediterranean around the 13th century, became essential instruments for European maritime expansion during the 15th and 16th centuries. Beyond their initial function—precisely delineating coastlines, ports, reefs, and shoals—they acquired aesthetic and symbolic dimensions. Amid Renaissance fervor, they were adorned with artistic motifs: compass roses, illustrations of sea monsters, and astronomical references. Spain, Portugal, and Italy distinguished themselves in creating these maps, which became coveted pieces for both their nautical utility and design beauty; one should not overlook the beautiful and impressive portolan charts contained in the "Kitab-ı Bahriye" (Book of Maritime Matters[1]) by the Ottoman Piri Reis.

During the first half of the 16th century, the Crown of Castile promoted the development of a Royal Standard (Padrón Real), an official master map compiling information gathered by navigators and cosmographers. However, difficulties in measuring longitude accurately, the secrecy policy at Seville's Casa de Contratación, and data leaks led to a cartographic mosaic: official copies, partial versions, apocryphal adaptations, and updates overlapping without strict chronological order. In this scenario, each portolan chart resulted from a collective process, often chaotic, where multiple authors added, removed, or corrected data according to news received from pilots and explorers.

1565ca. Carta Portulana de las costas del Pacífico de Guatemala al Norte de Perú, con las islas Galápagos. Library of Congress

The portolan chart dated ca. 1565[2], housed in the Library of Congress of the United States, represents this tradition: a document drawn on leather showing the Pacific coast from Guatemala to northern Peru, with a series of islands and toponyms that spark interest among historians, cartographers, and enthusiasts of ancient cartography. Nevertheless, the superimposition of chronologically disparate references (cities founded on different dates, toponyms linked to officials from specific periods) generates controversies about its date of creation, authorship, and relationship with other maps of the period.

2 The Context of Portolan Charts in the 16th Century

The base text underscores the progressive evolution of portolan charts, which began as coastal guides in the Mediterranean and ultimately transformed into geographical works of art. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, with transatlantic discoveries, these charts became more

1 1525. Piri Reis. Libro sobre Navegación. https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_09210/?st=gallery https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_09210/?st=gallery

2 Portolan chart of the Pacific coast from Guatemala to northern Peru with the Galapagos Islands (1565 ca.). Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2006627298/.

complex and were enriched with astronomical information, Renaissance symbology, and legends alluding to new territories. The rise of overseas navigation by Spain and Portugal was reflected in the meticulous description of coasts and ports, as well as in the incorporation of astronomical indicators that allowed pilots to orient themselves on the open sea.

In the Iberian Peninsula, the Castilian Crown encouraged the compilation of data in an official map (the *Padrón Real*), but tensions between secrecy and dissemination, coupled with technological limitations, produced a cartographic "puzzle." Each portolan chart could present variations depending on the information source and the date when data was added or corrected. Some islands appeared with different names in contemporary documents, and it was not unusual for a cartographer to omit a toponym to protect the exclusivity of their information.

Within this framework lies the portolan chart of ca. 1565, housed in the Library of Congress. It is drawn on leather, covers the Pacific coast from Guatemala to northern Peru, and mentions islands such as Galapagos (12 islands are shown)**,** Malpelo**,** Cocos (appearing as one major island surrounded by five smaller ones), Coiba (*yas delas mara*: several islands are shown), de la Plata**,** Puna, and Gorgona, although the latter three are not named but are found on the map. Its relevance lies in representing a synthesis of knowledge accumulated during decades of explorations. However, the document shows anachronisms that raise questions about its precise dating.

3 Landecho: Controversy Over the Date

The mention of a toponym called "Landecho," located in the Guatemala region, is one of the controversies generated by this cartographic record. According to a Library of Congress report (1929)[3], cited by John Woram (2000)[4], the map could not have been drawn before 1561, as the name "Landecho" would derive from Juan Núñez (or Martínez) de Landecho, who served as president of the Audiencia of Guatemala approximately between 1559 and 1564[5,6]. According to chronicles, Juan de Caballón y Arboleda[7], "*Oydor*" of the Royal Audiencia of Guatemala, Mayor of Nicaragua, and mayor of Costa Rica, ordered the construction of Puerto Landecho in the Tivives inlet (Costa Rica) in 1561, in honor of the President of the Audiencia of Guatemala.

If the map mentions Landecho, then it had to be created after this figure assumed his position and consolidated the toponym. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that the chart was produced after 1561. The Library of Congress report establishes ca. 1565[8].

However, John Woram[9] debates this interpretation: in his judgment, the existence of the name "Landecho" could date back to an earlier settlement, not necessarily linked to the period when Juan Núñez de Landecho was president. Woram speculates that the coincidence of the surname with the toponym proves nothing conclusive and that, therefore, the chart could predate 1561, or even 1559. Furthermore, Woram notes that there was a governor named Juan Martínez de Landecho active between 1563 and 1568, which further complicates the chronological attribution.

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3 Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929 (pg. 135). https://whalesite.org/GT/NOTES/NOTES-1.htm#Anonymous

4 Woram, John. "The Year of the Tortoise." Mercator's World, vol. 5, no. 3, May 2000, p. 48. Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A61995387/AONE?u=anon~1ba14047&sid=googleScholar&xid=a0c1f947. Accessed 5 June 2023.

5 Cabezas Carcahe, Horacio (2016). Gobernantes de Guatemala - Siglo XVI. Universidad Mesoamericana, Guatemala. (pg. 41). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301699277_Gobernantes_de_Guatemala_-_Siglo_XVI

6 Ciudades Fundadas en la América Central en el Siglo XVI (Sinopsis Alfabética). Carlos Meléndez Chaverri. https://revistas.ucr.ac.cr/index.php/anuario/article/view/3815/3688

7 Juan de Cavallón. https://www.castillogarcimunoz.es/juan-de-cavallon/

8 Idem. Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929 (pg. 135).

9 Idem. Woram, John. "The Year of the Tortoise."

Woram's central argument is the lack of evidence linking the foundation of the place with the official's presence, which leaves room for the conjecture that the denomination Landecho could come from an earlier date.

4 The 1525 Map: A Look at the Past

In parallel, there exists another portolan chart, dated approximately 1525[10], which also resides in the Library of Congress. This second chart covers the northern coast of Chile to Mexico and includes islands, without naming them, such as Coiba (known since 1515), **Cocos** (discovered in the mid-1520s), Malpelo (explored between 1530 and 1540), Gorgona (located in 1524), Isla de la Plata, and Puna.

Beyond its importance in the historical sequence of South Sea islands in cartography, could this chart perhaps have been the one that guided friar **Tomás de Berlanga** on his 1535 journey from Panama to Peru, during which he accidentally discovered the Galapagos Islands?

The chronological record of islands in portolan charts reflects the progression of knowledge about the American Pacific. Around 1515-1525, Coiba and other undefined islands are mentioned; between 1525 and 1540, Malpelo and Gorgona appear; and from 1540-1570, more precise names and locations of the Galapagos are consolidated. This represents not only cartographic progress but also how the European mentality assimilated and "ordered" the vast maritime space of the South Sea.

5 Latorre's Position and the Mention of Berlanga

Octavio Latorre[11], a researcher of Galapagos cartography, offers another perspective. According to him, the first representation of the Galapagos on a map date from the 1560s, and the portolan chart of ca. 1565 would be a key milestone in that chronology. Latorre concurs with the Library of Congress that the reference to Landecho and the mention of colonial foundations (Quito in 1534, Guayaquil in 1547, and "labuenabentura" in 1540) suggest that the document could not have been created before these dates.

Regarding Berlanga, Woram questions whether this 1565 map could have aided him in 1535. The answer is negative: the chart, in its current form, shows toponyms and cities founded after 1535, making it impossible for the bishop to have used it. However, Woram insinuates that the document may have had a foundation prior to 1535, which was progressively retouched with subsequent data. Among these added data would be the Galapagos archipelago, represented as "*ys de galapagos*" and painted over the map's[12] lines in a manner suggesting a late incorporation, which is not the case with the drawing of these lines throughout the map that appear superimposed on other elements represented in the cartographic document such as church figures, names, etc.

The debate between Latorre and Woram revolves around the reliability of the "Landecho = post-1561" criterion. For Latorre, the chronology is clear and places the chart at ca. 1565; for Woram, the superimposition of elements suggests that the chart had a longer and more complex life, with layers of information from different periods.

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10 ca. 1525 Portolan chart of the Pacific coast from Mexico to northern Chile. [Map] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2008628167/

11 Latorre O. (1993). La Cartografía Histórica de las Islas Galápagos: Breve Síntesis. En La Cartografía Histórica del Golfo de Guayaquil y de las Islas Galápagos. Catálogo de la Exposición. Febrero 1993. Instituto Geográfico de la Armada / Museo Antropológico / Banco Central del Ecuador. Guayaquil

12 Maps and Charts. https://whalesite.org/GT/MAPS/INDEX.htm

6 About City Foundations and Chronology

The document also mentions the foundations of Quito (1534), Guayaquil (1547), and Buenaventura (1540). If the portolan chart of ca. 1565 includes these references, it is evident that it could not have been created before these dates. This reinforces the idea that it was not available to Tomás de Berlanga in 1535.

Another relevant detail is the presence of Malpelo, whose discovery is dated between 1530 and 1540[13]. This island appears for the first time on a map of ca. 1529, attributed to the French corsair Giovanni Verrazano[14], where it appears under the name "*Mallpelo*." Similarly, Cocos Island ("*I. coques*") is recorded in Nicolás Desliens' 1541 cartography. Meanwhile, on Lorenz Friess's map (ca. 1525)[15], an island designated "dihs o dins" is detailed at approximately 1° N and 268° longitude, which some interpret as a mythical islet or perhaps an early reference to Cocos or Galapagos. Thus, the portolan chart of ca. 1565 would have gathered disparate information, collected over several decades.

The true essence of the controversy is the correlation between the reference to Landecho and the chronology. If it is accepted that the mention of Landecho could only have emerged after 1561, the date of the map closes around 1565. But if, as Woram claims, the toponym proves nothing, it is possible that the cartographic base is older.

The figure of Juan Núñez (or Martínez) de Landecho, president and governor of the Audiencia de los Confines (Guatemala) between 1559 and 1564, is crucial to the debate. Some chronicles indicate that in 1561, a port was built in the Tivives inlet (today's Caldera, Costa Rica) and was called "Landecho" in honor of this official. Documents exist that unequivocally link the establishment of the port with that year, so Woram's hypothesis that the name could have originated earlier has no support.

7 Some Magical Realism of Renaissance Cartography

The base text alludes to a kind of cartographic magical realism, in which uncertainty and creativity coexist. A map could be purchased blank, with the main coastline, and the buyer would add or commission a second author to include islands, sea monsters, or annotations. In this way, authorship became diffuse and chronology blurred.

The hypothesis that "someone" painted the Galapagos over the chart's lines, as Woram suggests, exemplifies this custom. A cartographer or merchant could update the document with recent news, without noting the date of the amendment. This explains why data from 1534 (Quito), 1547 (Guayaquil), 1561 (Landecho), and references to islands discovered over several decades coexist in the 1565 chart.

In this sense, the cartography of the time was not a simple reflection of reality, but a fabric in constant mutation, where the real and the imaginary merged. For a 16th century pilot, these maps

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13 CCO y Dimar. (2019). Malpelo es Colombia, Maravilla Estratégica. Comisión Colombiana del Océano - Dirección General Marítima. Editorial CCO. Bogotá. (pg. 24). https://cco.gov.co/cco/publicaciones/83-publicaciones/835-malpelo-es-colombia-maravilla-estrategica-libro.html

14 Gorgona and Malpelo Islands, Coastal and Oceanic National Marine Parks of Colombia's Eastern Tropical Pacific (Serial Nomination). https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1216.pdf

15 Muller, Frederik PhD (2011). Tabula moderna alterius hemisphaerii Manuscript map on paper, no date but before May 11, 1525, assigned to Lorenz Fries. CONCEPT.

were essential for orientation, but they also contained decorations and labels that responded to the fascination of the time with the exotic and the unknown.

8 Summary and Reflections

The portolan chart of ca. 1565 is, in essence, a testimony to how the geographical knowledge of the Pacific was articulated in 16th century Spain. Drawn on leather, it shows the coast from Guatemala to northern Peru and mentions islands as relevant as Galapagos, Malpelo, Cocos, Coiba, la Plata, and Puna. Despite its historical relevance, or perhaps precisely because of it, it is at the center of a debate:

1. **The Landecho Mystery**: The mention of this toponym in Guatemala has become the key to dating the map. The Library of Congress and Latorre maintain that, as it derives from the official Juan Núñez de Landecho, the map could not have been made before 1561. Woram, for his part, sees such correlation as insufficient and does not rule out that the chart may be earlier.
2. **The Hypothesis of Use by Berlanga**: The text rules out that the Bishop of Panama in 1535 had handled the final version of this portolan, as it contains cities and references from later dates. However, Woram proposes that the "base" of the map could have existed previously and been subject to continuous updates.
3. **The 1525 Map**: This other document, older, also preserved by the Library of Congress, describes the coast from Chile to Mexico and represents, without naming them, Coiba, Cocos, Malpelo, Gorgona, la Plata, and Puna. It could have been the cartographic source that inspired Berlanga or other pilots.
4. **Cartographic Magical Realism**: In 16th century cartography, it was not uncommon for a map to be modified by multiple hands. Toponyms moved, islands were relocated or duplicated, and references could come from rumors or incomplete reports. This organic and changing character means that current research faces true palimpsests, where each layer of ink hides or nuances the previous one.
5. **The Relevance of the Chart**: Beyond the controversies, the chart of ca. 1565 offers an overview of the state of knowledge about the Pacific in the second half of the 16th century. The fact that it includes names of colonial foundations and islands discovered in different decades illustrates how the Castilian Crown was incorporating information about its vast maritime empire.
6. **The Presence of the Galapagos on the Chart**: A comparative analysis shows similar representation patterns of the Galapagos Islands in the maps of Mercator (1569) and Ortelius (1570), as well as in the one from ca. 1565. Their distribution is almost circular in all three cases. The number of islands represented on the maps are eleven in Mercator's, eight in Ortelius's, and twelve in the ca. 1565 chart. The question arises: When was the name Galapagos added to the chart under analysis?

9 Conclusion

The controversy surrounding the dating of the map due to the reference to Landecho is an example of how an apparently minor detail — a toponym — can spark an extensive methodological debate. For Latorre and the Library of Congress, it is sufficient evidence that the map is later than 1561, having been finalized around 1565. For Woram, the correlation is inconclusive, and the chart could have emerged earlier, with later additions. Regarding the supposed connection to Fray Tomás de Berlanga in 1535, the document itself reveals that its final version could not have been available by that date, although it leaves open the possibility of an earlier base that evolved over time.

The portolan map dated ca. 1565, by its features (held in the Library of Congress), does present the possibility that the representation of the Galápagos was added after the main drafting of the document. The primary evidence lies in the superimposition of the islands over preexisting lines or elements of the map, something John Woram points to as an indication that they were painted in a later phase. However**,** there is no definitive documentary proof (such as date annotations or authorship) that conclusively confirms this late addition; the hypothesis is primarily based on analysis of technique and the arrangement of the toponyms.

A question arises, however, whether the name Galápagos was added after the publication of Gerard Mercator's 1569 map "*Nova et aucta orbis terrae descriptio ad usum navigantium emendate accomod...*"[16], which depicts 11 islands, one slightly "larger," surrounded by nine smaller islands named "y de los glopegos" situated at 281° longitude and 10° north latitude; or, in the map published in 1570 in the atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* by Abraham Ortelius, under the title "*Americae Sive Novi Orbis, Nova Descriptio*"[17], where the "*y de los galopegos*" are represented by 8 islands arranged in a circular formation, located slightly north of the equator and close to the 280° meridian, while the northernmost island is named "*y de los galepegos*" (Cocos Island). Comparatively, both the representations of the Galápagos islands on Mercator's (1569) and Ortelius' (1570) maps are similar to those found on the ca. 1565 (anonymous) map.

Ultimately, the portolan chart of ca. 1565 stands as a complex object, a silent witness to how Europeans were discovering and understanding the world. Its protean nature — a product of revisions, different hands, and data from multiple periods — symbolizes the "magical realism" of Renaissance cartography, where precision coexists with rumor and fantasy, and where each new piece of information is superimposed without entirely erasing the previous one. It is this dynamism that makes the study of historical cartography so captivating: each map is a cultural palimpsest that reveals, through its lines and colors, the struggle of a society to claim a maritime space that was as vast as it was enigmatic.

16 Nova et aucta orbis terrae descriptio ad usum navigantium emendate accomodata : illustriss... principi... Wilhelmo Duci juliae, Clivorum et Monti Opus hoc... eius auspiciis inchoatum... / Gerardus Mercator dedicabat. Autor : Mercator, Gerard (1512-1594). Cartographe. Dédicateur. Datos de edición : 1569. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7200344k/f7.item.zoom

17 1571. Americae Sive Novi Orbis Nova Descriptio. https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/92275/americae-sive-novi-orbis-nova-descriptio-ortelius